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American Red Cross base hospital no. 38 in the world war. United States army base hospital no. 38, organized under the auspices of the Jefferson Medical College and Hospital, stationed at Nantes, France, 1918-1919, by W. M. L. Coplin.

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American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38

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## American Red Cross Base Hospital No. 38 in the World War - XXIV: A Reverie, Recollections, Incidents, Reflections by an Enlisted Soldier

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## XXIV

### A REVERIE

RECOLLECTIONS; INCIDENTS; REFLECTIONS

BY AN ENLISTED SOLDIER

**I**T is a little difficult to recall the exact spirit of those days and nights in and about the hospital, for time passes and much has come between. In the minds of all the officers and men one idea was fixed so surely that, psychologically, it was certain knowledge—the war should be speedily won. Solid backing at home was partly the cause of this belief, and the visits from General Pershing were assuring. Perhaps American determination to see it through, and little first hand experience of actual war conditions, were contributing factors. But the end came quicker than was expected.

The first real try-out came from the fighting about Chateau-Thierry, with a rush horrible in aspect. That costly advance was followed by carload upon carload of wounded heroes coming by hospital trains that rolled up to the Doulon and Nantes Stations. Not having sufficient ambulances to transport the unexpected number, the French Hospital co-operated with us in every way.

Many soldiers were dead when removed from trains; a few passed along during the journey to the hospital; most of them fought through to recovery. At the front the overworked surgeons in the first-aid and in advanced dressing stations, in dug-outs and in tents for "non-transportables," toiled heroically, but time passed, hurry became pressing, crowding increased, every minute stretcher-bearers brought in more wounded. Consequently, night after night, in chilling rain and over muddy, desolate, dark roads, lurching ambulances and stretcher-bearers conveyed to trains their shattered burdens; luxurious American hospital trains came in bearing the suffering wrecked bodies that G. H. Q. called wastage. Such scenes were being enacted throughout France, the curtain falling at many other American hospitals; ours was only one of many places where the tragedy was staged. And so, for four terrible years, it had been with the French and British, Belgians and Germans, and all others mixed up in the horrible affair, collecting as its toll the best of each nation's youth. Day by day, month after month, the casualties increased; the acreage of little wooden crosses steadily grew—a sight not to be contemplated for long by the actors in the grim affair. It is inharmonious with the boasted civilization of the world's greatest powers; it seemed that a cog had slipped in the great machine, the scheme of things seemed out of balance, the universe awry.

Sometimes one dropped in on Ted Casey at Ward 19

and quite envied him the comfortable little room which had been made habitable by Engle and himself. The rows of beds were very neat in their exact alignment and spotless linen. In fact the place was like a new pin and its appearance had been commended by the C. O. That was before Chateau-Thierry. A few nights later, what a change! Here the gassed patients had been brought. These poor lads, some blinded, others horribly burned, fought death like demons. Dressings, torn off in delirium, littered the floor. Some of the patients had to be strapped in bed. Fortunately, many were unconscious. In a raspy, broken voice, and between convulsive, strangling coughs, a young fellow sang snatches from an old song,

"My only love is always near,  
In country or in town;  
I see her twinkling feet and hear  
The rustle of her gown."

Engle and Casey were haggard from loss of sleep. They did the best possible for these men and offered the little comfort at their command, but nothing much could be done as many of the boys were going the long, long voyage. A young giant, sergeant of marines, believed that he still led his men over the top. It required two men to keep him in bed when, with curses and groans, he attempted to escape. Colonel Lambie, in making rounds, exclaimed, "God, what a sight!" The young

fellow was finishing his song very slowly, the last he would ever sing,

"Lightly I hoped when hope was high,  
And youth beguiled the chase,  
I follow, follow still, but I  
Shall never see her face."

It was a bitter thing to hear. What a transcendent and supreme opportunity to see the "glory" of war of which so much was heard from profiteers and politicians who never saw a wounded man dying nor heard the death rattle of a gassed doughboy passing into the Beyond; profiteers who grew wealthy on ships with wooden rivets and on aeroplanes that would not fly, while hundreds of young airmen waited in France month after month for their machines, finally operating any that the French could spare in order to diminish, in some measure, the dread of moonlight nights. Meanwhile, at home, some men prospered and the war was a "great thing"; "shows the world what the Yanks can do," and quite comfortably read the bunkum which newspapers served, about easy victories, the ridiculously small lists of casualties, while the G. H. Q. sent new men to the Front, the "wastage" of withered ranks made good by replacements—"wastage; replacements"; words, words, death, despair!

Near the old Chateau on the grounds there is a wooded grove of considerable size. It was a pleasant place with its large trees and, being considerably removed from the



wards, offered a somewhat secluded spot from the atmosphere of the hospital, and so was frequented by convalescents and hospital men alike on odd moments when off duty. It was good to stretch out at full length here under these great trees and gaze upward into the blue arching sky with its white fleecy clouds which looked so peaceful, so far removed from the struggle. It took a little jumpiness from one's nerves. Often ten or more would be lying on the ground, some asleep and some with eyes wide open, others set with a strange stare. One came to know them as the fighting men just returned from the Front, who had gone through horrible experiences, and seen ghastly things. Many had more than physical wounds; something within them had given way, they needed time for readjustment, to make some order of their tangled thoughts and impressions, to gain control of ragged nerves. It took weeks for some, months for others, some never recovered. One late afternoon, when a bit done up from several nights' work, a hospital corps man threw himself down near two soldiers who appeared to be sleeping. For half an hour, turning over in his mind various aspects of the war, lost in reflections, altogether sombre, he had nearly forgotten the two doughboys, when, without a movement or the slightest stir, but as if giving voice to thoughts, one exclaimed violently, "Damn the whole rotten mess," "Curse all armies, we're all fools killing one another"; his companion rejoined "And each side praying to the same

God for victory." Stretched out on their stomachs, neither had raised his head and had anyone else been near the voices would not have been attributed to their proper sources. As the hospital worker rose to leave, some birds, startled by the noise, flew from the branches overhead out beyond the wide field. With much chatter and in graceful flight they sped onwards toward the Loire, a silver ribbon in the distance, and finally disappeared in the waving poplars on its banks. The rays of the declining sun bathed the scene in a warm mellow light, delightful to look upon, for the winter months had not yet arrived with their continuous chilling rain. And it was perfectly clear then, with the words of these soldiers still resounding, and in this lovely panorama, spread out like a painter's dream, that the world was mad. In the Divine scheme of things what could be the remote purpose of such misery and suffering where, on every side, stretched the serene dignity and transcendent beauty of nature. After months in the zone of combat where death's harvest ripened and rotted, a vote by the men in line, both allies and enemies, would probably have been for peace; they were not cowards; they, in some measure saw the uselessness of it all. But as if impelled by some invisible force there could be no stopping now; hate was the doctrine of the hour, more and more money for shells, more and more men to hurl them against—a wild and terrifying prospect.

A Colonel from G. H. Q. called to see a wounded but

convalescent reserve officer and old friend. "How are things going?" the reserve inquired; "Fine," answered the Colonel, "we can see our way out, it's all clear now, we have the men." Just back of the officer sat a convalescent artilleryman, bandaged head in hands and elbows on knees. A Chaplain was reading a letter from home, from man's only angel, "Mother," which told the soldier of his father's death, of destitution, that she was waiting for her boy. He could not see his "way out"—hopelessly blind. The reader stopped, looked up, coughed and frowned, and the confident Colonel strode on. Such was the tragedy of one who will never "see his way out."

So it was with a delicious sense of freedom that one turned his back on the sights and sorrows of the Hospital for a few coveted hours in Nantes or the inns of the neighborhood. A soldier off duty has few cares. There was usually a crowd in the cafe near the crossroads at old Doulon. One can see it clearly even now, after three years, as it often looked to Ted Casey and the writer when, after a cold muddy tramp, the light from the doorway beckoned through the darkness and the rain. Somehow it always reminded one of Omar Khauiyyam's tavern; regularly this would be an "off-duty" dinner—jambou, pommes de terres frites, omelette au rhum, beaucoup beurre and vin blanc. And up there in that little room, in the dim wavering candlelight, caps and overcoats undoffed for it was cold, men would enjoy such rare delica-



cies as butter and the omelette, discuss the latest news from the Front, engage in idle gossip or anything else under the sun, and listen to the racket downstairs. After awhile the door would open very quietly and, in her mysterious way, Lucienne would appear with "autre bouteille"; presently the food and wine, and smiling Lucienne would bring some joy of life back to the group—Lucienne with her merry heart and roguish eyes—heavens, we wonder what she is doing now.

Then after dinner, perched on a couple of wine casks in the kitchen, men would marvel at the skill with which Mme. Visset cooked, using but the smallest fire made from a few twigs; wood was very scarce. Around the walls hung great collections of saucepans and kettles; the ceiling was low and blackened by the smoke which for years had curled up from the wideopen hearth. One corner was heaped with boxes and barrels whereon men sat, and in another nook was a tall grandfather's clock, the pride of the family. This was of elaborate workmanship and bore all the appearance of age; in fact Lucienne confided that it had stood there for six generations; but this was on Armistice Night and after many anisettes and it might have been no more than twenty years for all one now can know.

Outside, in the café, the gathering was a picturesque one. Many stocky poilus in battered uniforms, from some of whom hung the *croix de guerre*, conversed with much animation. The red fez of the French Colonials

added an oriental touch. Here a chap with an empty sleeve; there a crutch propped against a table; near the door was one whose head was entirely covered by bandages. Occasionally a few negroes from a nearby labor battalion drifted in. Usually there were also men from "38." One remembers Carlyle Wright, Fred and Joe Marvil, Frankenberger and many of the other ambulance drivers, Willis, Martin, Wilson and Joe Jones, who had lots of pluck. Men of "38" were in good favor for, in the early days Major Pratt had pulled little Pierre through a severe attack of pneumonia and Mme. Visset almost worshiped the officer.

Cigarette smoke hung densely in the air. The Americans made the most noise which sometimes rose to a hubbub in the heat of a discussion or argument caused often by the patients who were soon to be discharged from the hospital. With the terrible mud and slime of the trenches and all the rest of it confronting them again, they were enjoying themselves recklessly and as best they might. It was bright and cheery here; long ago any illusions about the Front had been dispelled. "Come on, Bill, might as well have another; Lord knows where we'll be next week, we're up for cannon fodder anyhow." "Yes, I guess you're right, that's just about it—Encore, porto, Lucienne!"

It was late when they left and nearly all had gone. To those who remained, faintly came the familiar crunch of hob-nailed shoes on the gravel and the song of the men

as they hiked back to camp, indistinct and quavering in the distance, far off down the road—"There's a long, long trail awinding——"

When the old U. S. S. "Freedom" with its clanking and dilapidated engines steamed slowly into New York Harbor, never was there a more wonderful sight than this to Major Forst and his gang. And especially since they knew it was a toss-up whether they ever should see it again, when, at our departure, the Statue of Liberty gradually faded in the morning mist. The welcome received, beginning with the Mayor's tugboat and extending all the way down the line to Camp Upton, was good to hear and warmed the hearts that were made glad.

But somehow after the coveted discharge papers were in our hands things did not seem quite the same. Some found it difficult to settle down in the old rut of a civilian; it was rather tame, life had lost a little of its savor. Gone was the old camaraderie and in its place came the mistrust and suspicion of the business world together with the great American cry after bigness and progress. Pioneers in what? Heaven only knows! In noisy begrimed cities and a cramped existence perhaps. Certainly little in the better things of life, culture or the arts.

Not long ago one evening a few of us happened together, the conversation naturally turned to our days overseas and we talked warmly of our experiences—the interest Major Forst and Captain Hustead took in the

men, and Captain Owen who worked early and late, unceasingly, and Lieutenant Meyer who made duty in the Laboratory as pleasant as possible; the devoted services of the nurses, the day Genevieve Vix came to the Hospital and sang to the ragged accompaniment of a dough-boy. And we recall how Hughie Gallagher doctored us up through the dark days of the "flu" when the officers had not a minute to spare from the never-ending stream from the front. With us was an ex-officer of the line, an old chum whose service ribbon contained four stars and whom we knew even now would sit up in bed, tense with excitement and call loudly to the men. We were talking with him when a chance remark came to us from another group across the room, "Don't bother about it, the war is over now." He gripped my arm and exclaimed, "Did you hear that? Yes, it's over all right, especially for those poor devils who still lie around Chateau-Thierry or those who sleep beneath the trees of the Argonne—that talk makes me sick."

Shortly after he passed through the doorway and strode quickly down the street, soon to disappear in the darkness. A cold drizzling rain drenched the countryside; from a nearby ditch some frogs were croaking in their dismal fashion. One had seen it like this at Le Grande Blottereau, in faraway but unforgotten France.



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France had more than 8,500,000 men who could be mobilized at the beginning of the war, but at the end of that war 5,500,000 were mutilated, wounded and killed. We gave all we could.

*Clemenceau.*

DEAD

France .....	1,400,000
England .....	850,000
Italy .....	500,000
United States .....	60,000